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## Kirkos

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## Kirkos

Prabhu Venkataraman

Yesterday morning I received a newspaper clipping that changed the course of my life. It arrived in a small grey envelope, my mother's Cyrillic handwriting on the front instantly recognizable by its beautiful loops and arches. I was expecting it; my mother had told me it was in the mail. The clipping was of an obituary, that of Robert Mascas, a younger cousin of mine who'd lived in my former hometown of Kirkos. He had turned eighteen three months ago, precisely seven years to the day after I had. The obituary didn't mention what my mother had on the phone, that Bobby had committed suicide.

I hadn't any intention of publishing a story about Kirkos when I first heard of Bobby's death. We weren't particularly close, and I hadn't seen him in almost eight years. Besides, death was not an uncommon occurrence among older teenagers in my old hometown. For people not from Kirkos, one's life expectancy is computed after they have made it to age five. For the people of Kirkos, computing life expectancy is best left for when one turns twenty, given the prevalence of deaths among eighteen and nineteen year olds. But looking at a copy of his obituary affected me in a most unexpected way. I wasn't surprised by the sadness, and, at first, I thought I would just take a respectful moment, then put it aside and return to writing the column that I'd originally intended for you to read today: about the sexual infidelity of a national tennis star. But my desire to finish that piece for *Hypocrite Confidential* vanished upon looking at my cousin's obituary. Instead of *faux* grief, a different emotion started simmering in me. I'm not sure that there's a single word for it; an unfamiliar blend of shame, anger, and frustration. It pushed me to write this piece, about the dark secret of the town of Kirkos, instead of the sexual antics of celebrities that you are used to reading about.

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I learned the secret of Kirkos on the day I turned eighteen. (I found out later that all the boys and girls of the village learn its secret in basically the same way, that is to say that my own experience was fairly typical.) It was 10:00 am that day when I looked out the window and saw the five village elders approaching my cottage. The first thing that

struck me was that it was early in the day, and my folks were at work. Whatever offence I might have committed, it was typical for the elders to visit after dusk, when they could be sure that my parents would be home. It had occurred to me then that maybe something had happened to one of my parents. I opened the door before they had a chance to knock.

The elder leading the group spoke. “Good morning, John. How are you today?”

“Fine,” I answered uncertainly. They were being nice! The elders were stern and serious men, who did not exhibit the niceties of polite conversation, or much conversation at all, not when dealing with kids and teenagers.

“Good. So you’re not ill or anything, are you?” This was bizarre. What was with the concern about my health? “No, I’m fine. What’s the matter?”

“Well, the council wondered if we could have a word with you. You’re not in trouble or anything,” the elder said and smiled.

The elders are nervous! How unlike them. Any relief I may have felt at not being the target of rebuke and punishment was replaced by a fear of what horrible news they might be bringing me.

They followed me into the living room, and took up fully the spaces on the two couches. I settled into the rocking chair facing them, and observed that they seemed to draw comfort from sitting close together, three on one couch and two on the other. The two elders who’d never been in my house before stared at the huge hearth that made up a large section of the main wall. They gazed at the assortment of objects lined up side-by-side on top of the hearth. Many of them were awards, tokens of my childhood ‘achievements’—participation in a village play as an infant (I have no memory of that), second prize in a drawing/painting contest in the fourth grade, a bronze coin for third prize in an eighth grade science fair project, and a small silver decorative plate for winning second prize in a singing contest last year. I imagined the elders’ thoughts: art, science, and singing, so was this kid really versatile, or were his parents trying to help him find some kind of talent?

The oldest of them, the chair of the Council, leaned forward. “What we have to tell you might be difficult to believe. It’s going to take you some time to fully accept. You’re going to have lots of questions as you try to make sense of this. We will answer them as best we can, and you can approach us any time later as you think of more questions or concerns.” I nodded.

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The people in Kirkos over eighteen years of age are of two types: the Ghosts and the Committed. Both types are easily identifiable. The Ghosts are those who never fully recover from learning the truth about their lives. Many of them are young, typically just a few months past eighteen. They spend most of their time indoors, and can be identified when they step outside by their haunted expression, bloodshot eyes, and wobbly steps, their balance compromised from consuming large quantities of *rakke*. They never seem to stick around Kirkos for very long. The Ghosts who don't leave tend not to live for more than a few months. They die from alcohol poisoning, cirrhosis, or more immediate means of self-destruction. Other Ghosts, like me, opt to leave Kirkos after a while. For it is easier to forget what you know when you aren't surrounded by others who also know. We try to bury our knowledge in a locked box deep in our subconscious. If we are successful in not letting the truth out of the box too often, then we manage to make a typical life out in the world. But those who are unsuccessful, either because of an inability to self-deceive or because some personal tragedy permanently opens the box, will, like the Ghosts who stay behind, eventually succumb to their shattered soul and die within a few months.

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They told me.

Each person born in the village was fated to repeat his or her life.

In its entirety.

Down to every last detail.

Every pleasurable moment, every painful experience, every interaction, the most joyous occasions and the most horrific accidents would be repeated in their next life.

So it would be with my next life.

But I wouldn't have any memory of my past life.

And this recurrence of my life would continue for all time.

That it was now up to me how I wanted to live my life in the face of this fact.

"You realize what this means, John. For some people, this sort of knowledge is a curse. It can break them down, destroy their spirit, and make it impossible for them to continue. Others choose to simply ignore this information, and continue on with their

lives. It's the only way that they can carry on. But for a select few, such knowledge provides the most remarkable opportunity.”

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When I was twelve, I'd been out one day with my friends in the Kirkos market. We were walking from vendor to vendor, considering which snack to buy with the change we had. Roasted peanuts, fresh lemonade, and cut guava fruit seasoned with chili pepper and salt all presented temptations. Suddenly an excruciating pain had seized my lower back. I'd cried out for two of my friends; they were beside me instantly, helping me lie on my back in the street. My jaw clenched and my hands knotted into fists in reaction to the pain. I lost control of my bowels and voided myself. I heard shouts from the crowd and saw the people surrounding me step back, including my friends. Some of them were biting their cheeks to keep from smiling.

Eventually the village doctor arrived, and a few kind volunteers picked me up by my shoulders and feet and carried me to the doctor's clinic. As I was laying on a cold bathroom floor, a male orderly cut off my clothes and sprayed me with water from a hose. The doctor iced my back and then arranged for me to be taken home. The inflammation in my back subsided in a few days, and I returned to school.

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As I tried to process what the elders were saying, I recalled an image: of lying on the street in my filth, helpless, watching both strangers and my friends fighting to keep from laughing.

The elder who was speaking clasped his hands together, and leaned forward. “I know what you're thinking. Every thing that you've suffered thus far, great and small, is going through your mind. The idea of going through all of those experiences again is unbearable. As I said, in your future life you won't remember anything of this life. Just as you don't remember anything of your past lives. You don't, do you.” It was not a question. I nodded, though I was now gripped by a new thought: I've already been through, in a past life—correction, *lives*—everything I've been through up to now.

“The point though, John, is that knowing that your life will eternally recur in the future gives you a reason to take responsibility for your past. Too many people, in fact almost everyone in the world outside of Kirkos, live their lives only by looking to the

future. They don't want to think about their past, certainly not the painful aspects of it. And why would they? What for them would be the point of reliving past pain, when the future holds the promise of being so much better? For many of them, their religious faith tells them that they will be redeemed from this life when it's over. That they will be compensated for their earthly suffering by a life in heaven, comprised of eternal bliss. And who knows, perhaps for them it's true." The elder sighed. "But it's not true for us. Those of us born in here in Kirkos must contend with the fact that when we die, we will return. For us, time is cyclical, not linear. So we must each find a way to redeem *this* life, rather than look forward to being redeemed *from it*. Do you understand?"

Not really, I said, though on some level I was starting to grasp what the elder was trying to tell me.

"You can't ignore your past, John. None of us can. And if you want to redeem this life, if you want to look back at the end of your life and say, 'I've lived a life that I can own; I *will* that I live this life over and over, *in its every detail*' then you must find a way not only to live a meaningful life going forward, but to make something of even the bad, the harms, that you've endured in the past and might endure in the future."

"Think of a beautiful painting." Another elder spoke. "Each of the different sections of the painting by itself may not be beautiful. Parts of it could even be ugly. But a creative artist has found a way to create a whole in such a way that the ugly parts add to, indeed are *essential to*, the beauty of the painting. And this is what your life can be. You are its artist. You must find a way to create something beautiful from it."

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Besides the Ghosts, the other residents of Kirkos—its 'permanent' adult residents—are known as the Committed.

The Committed live their lives in full consciousness of the fact that the decisions they take will matter. They don't conceive of the bad in their past as experiences to be forgotten, or even to just learn from. For them, redeeming the bad in their past means making something of it, *transfiguring it*, such that it can be part of a beautiful whole that they will call their life. Like the artist who picks up the pieces discarded by others, and puts them together in a configuration that creates something more meaningful and beautiful than the sum of its parts could ever be, a Committed works on the pieces of his or her own life, *especially* the pieces that someone else with that life would have discarded into the dustbin of the past.

Raina is a survivor of rape. She chooses to tell her story to other people as part of a program to educate them about rape--its prevalence, causes, societal complicity, and the suffering inflicted on the victim, the victim's family, and the expressive harm imposed on some of the groups that constitute her identity. She does this despite the fact that social norms may often make victims like her feel ashamed of having been raped.

AJ is a soldier who has served many years in a war zone. He returns home and educates the public about the nature of armed conflict, the toll it takes on the civilian population in the war zone, on the combatants on both sides of the conflict, the devastation—physical, psychological, societal, cultural, political—resulting from it.

Jeremy is a young African American who survived a brutal physical assault perpetrated by racists. He devotes his life to understanding the psychology of racists, the social, economic, and political environments that gives rise to racist emotions, and then works to reduce racism in the world by addressing these causes. This involves not just activism to address economic and political problems in society, but actually reaching out and having conversations with those whom he would prefer to never associate with in any way.

Shannon is a scientist who's been diagnosed with ALS (a progressive muscular degenerative disease). She leads a team of researchers to develop a voice-control software program that would allow people who lack motor control to operate an electronic wheelchair, a special phone and computer with just verbal instructions, giving them a degree of autonomy and power that significantly enriches their lives.

Raina, AJ, Jeremy, and Shannon are all Committeds. Each of them has collected the shattered pieces of their lives, worked to impose order on those pieces, and created something beautiful from the debris. They are the ultimate performing artists.

The Committed of Kirkos are a rare breed in the world. They live their lives in a way that is as authentic and true to themselves as anyone could aspire to. They find a way to embrace their lives in its entirety. Because for them, this life is all there is.

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At this point, if you haven't dismissed my story as just another ridiculous tabloid account, like the one about J-Law's half-Martian child that *Hypocrite Confidential* headlined last month, you may well be wondering, what is my impetus for publishing a story exposing the secret of Kirkos? I left my hometown and moved to California at

least partly to distract myself from the eternal recurrence of my life (one can never truly forget it). I became a journalist who covers the most sensational stories, not just because the public in general (and you in particular, dear reader) has an interest in the scandalous and the morbid, which makes cultivating people's *schadenfreude* a relatively secure career, but because being immersed in the sewer of people's life histories keeps me from sinking into my own.

So why expose the town's secret?

I wish to do so in honor of the ghosts who couldn't go on after their eighteenth birthday. The Committed of Kirkos tend to consider as cowards those who can't accept their fate. While no one would openly say that ghosts who ended their lives were cowards, there is a sense of shame about them that pervades the town. This shame is accompanied by a touch of arrogance—no doubt fueled by the belief that the ghosts were weak, unable to confront and then take ownership of their lives. When confronted with hypotheticals like an individual who suffered severe abuse as a child or is born with a crippling disease, the default response by a Committed is to nominally acknowledge the trauma of such events but then point to Raina or some other exceptional Committed as an example of how sheer will can overcome any trauma. The arrogance is generally the worst among those Committeds who haven't really suffered. And even among those who have, there is often a distinct lack of understanding of how much people vary in their psychological traits, and that these traits (to the extent that they aren't genetic) are largely developed without the conscious awareness of the individuals themselves; these traits profoundly affect one's ability to cope with trauma. It was this arrogance toward the suffering of others that made it impossible for me to continue living in Kirkos, more so than my desire to forget my eternal recurrence. And it is also why I can no longer bear for the town's secret to stay a secret. I need to do this for Bobby, and for every other young person who has been and who will be looked down upon by the Committed for not 'redeeming' their life.

Will my publishing this story change anything in the long run? Clearly not. Neither I nor anyone else I know of found out about the nature of our lives until the village elders told us. Given that I must have lived this life infinitely many times in the past, it must be the case that in my lifetime, certainly before my rebirth, this revelation about Kirkos will disappear. Indeed, I fully expect that my piece will be dismissed as the ramblings of a madman. But if, just if, the story did take off, and someone attempted even a cursory investigation into the revelations of this piece, then it would cause some turmoil in my former hometown. That, by itself, would give me pleasure. And what of a



child or young adult in Kirkos who is suffering abuse at the hands of an adult, and hears about this story? While it would undoubtedly be devastating for him or her to find out, it might also prompt them to come forward about their abuse sooner, as they think about their next life.

Am I being naïve? Overly optimistic? Perhaps just a bit. But I still need to do this. I remember the elders telling me that we don't need to change the world for our lives to be considered transfigured. They stressed that the redemption--the transfiguration--occurs from the point of view of the *individual*, it is based on *his* values, not on whether what he does is of use to anyone else. It is the *individual* who must be willing to endorse his life in its entirety; to the extent that he can, whether others also do so is meaningless. And they were right. I need to publish this story so that my life, Bobby's life, and the lives of other ghosts are not looked down upon as weak. Whether you believe me is something I can't control. But the responsibility of putting this story in front of you is mine; telling it is my redemption.

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